

5. Going beyond “---i” and “---na” Japanese Adjective Forms with English-speaking Learners

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Abstract:

This study undertook (1) to find out what adjective related mistakes and problems English-speaking learners of Japanese have in translating from English to Japanese and vice versa, (2) what translation strategies they use, (3) how texts, reference materials and dictionaries deal with Japanese adjective forms, and (4) what teachers should do about teaching these forms. The results show that, compared with “---i” and “---na” adjectives, very little instruction is given in using other forms of Japanese adjectives, resulting in a situation in which a dictionary is of little use for complex adjectives. Our claim is that the Japanese adjective forms are more strictly rule governed than we think they are, and, therefore, a solid grammatical understanding of them is essential not only for using these forms correctly but also for consulting a dictionary for translation purposes.

1. Introduction

Regarding Japanese adjective forms, we as Japanese teachers frequently hear erroneous expressions from our students such as the following:

(a) *Watashi no kuruma wa kowareta desu.* “My car has been broken.”

私の車は 壊れた です。

(b) *Ano hito wa totemo yaseta desu.* “The person is very thin.”

あの人は とても 痩せた です

The errors in the first example seem to stem from a random selection of a definition from an English-Japanese dictionary for the word “broken.” Similarly, in the second example, “yaseta” is substituted for “thin.” Mistakes of this kind are a result of the learners’ using their knowledge of their first language (L1) to process the target language (L2) and is termed “language transfer.” The erroneous variations of the L2 are called “interlanguage” (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982; Corder, 1983). Much evidence indicates that language transfer is an important part of the second language learning process and outcome (Gass and Selinker, 1983; Kellerman & Smith, 1986).

This study is based on an examination of areas of difficulty the English-speaking learners have with Japanese adjectives. Using the concept of language transfer, we found that learners too often substituted what they believed were correct forms of Japanese adjectives for the equivalent English adjectives. Our research used the longstanding methods of contrastive analysis (Nickel, 1971) and error analysis (Richard, 1971) to determine the following:

1. What kinds of adjective-related mistakes are common among English speakers who translate from English into Japanese and vice versa?
2. What problems do the learners face in overcoming these mistakes?

The results indicate that some mistakes and problems of the learners stem from how the students are taught and practice the adjective forms. Therefore, to further our understanding of the learners' difficulties, we examined how adjectives are presented and taught in some widely used texts, reference materials and dictionaries.

It is our hope that in this article we can call attention to the difficulty English speakers have in using and understanding Japanese adjectives and the insufficient presentation of the various Japanese adjective forms in many learning materials. Finally, we present suggestions to help ease or avoid problems associated with learning Japanese adjectives.

Because this article is intended for not only teachers, but also learners of Japanese, we have tried to avoid the jargon of linguistic tools and analysis. Our aim towards simplicity and clarity in our use of grammatical terms and explanations is based on the concept of "teaching grammar," (Wilkins, 1974) developed within the framework of communicative language teaching. In this sense, this article is not only descriptive, but also pedagogical.

2. Methodology

Our research focused upon the use of the following adjective forms in both the modifying and predicate positions.

- a) "--j" and "--na" adjectives such as "tsumaranaj" and "shizukana."

(See translation items 1-4 and 13-16 in Appendix A: Translation Worksheet.)

- b) "--ta" and "--teiru" as an application of the past participle ("--ed") and ("--en") and the present participles ("--ing") in English such as "tsukurareta hanashi", "tsuita hikouki" and "aruteiru hito."

(See translation items 5-7 and 17-20 in Appendix A.)

- c) "--ta" and "--teiru" without "-ed" or "-ing" forms in English such as "damp air" for "kawaita kuuki" and "steady relationship" for "shikkarishiteiru kankei."

(See translation items 8-9 and 21-22 in Appendix A.)

d) noun + “no” and noun + “no” + (“---i” or plain verb) such as “amakuchi no sake” for “sweet SAKE” and “kuuki no nuketa taiya” for “a flat tire.”

(See translation items 10-12 in Appendix A.)

The ten subjects in this study were randomly selected from students enrolled in the third-year Japanese class during the spring semester, 1997 at Ball State University in Indiana. Students at this level were selected because they had previously studied the Japanese adjective forms that we were interested in investigating.

The research tools included a list of English sentences to be translated by the subjects into Japanese and a list of Japanese sentences to be translated into English. All of the twenty-two sentences for the translation included the adjective forms for this study. (See Appendix A for the translation worksheet.) During the translation exercises, the subjects were allowed to use dictionaries. For presentation purposes, the adjective forms, which are the research points of this study, have been underlined; however, the subjects received only the sentences and were not told what we were investigating specifically.

An additional research tool was the traditional interview, by which an attempt was made to find out the reasons for the subjects’ making mistakes or having difficulties with the translations and to evaluate how well the subjects really understood the use of Japanese adjectives.

The last materials we used for this study were several widely used Japanese texts, grammar reference materials, and dictionaries. (See the list in Appendix B: Examined Materials.) The reference materials are limited to those which are written in English for the learners as well as for teachers, and were randomly selected.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Items 1-4 and 13-16: “---i” and “---na” Adjectives

Most of the subjects translated “---i” and “---na” adjectives correctly both from English into Japanese and vice versa. Some had difficulty with the predicate use.

Examples:

Item 14: “---was very cold.” was translated into “---totemo samui deshita.” in stead of “-----samukatta desu.”

Item 16: “---was not kind.” was translated into “-----shinsetsunai deshita.” or “---

---shinsetsu dewanakatta.” instead of “---shinsetsu dewa arimasen deshita.”

An important finding, however, was that the subjects who had problems with the predicate use of these adjectives scored very poorly on the rest of the translation work which required mastery of the formation of the relative clause in Japanese and English. This indicates that continued practice of the predicate use of adjectives is needed throughout a course, particularly if success with additional forms of adjectives is to be achieved.

Naturally, the students had less difficulty translating from Japanese than into Japanese. The results show that for the most part, these types of adjectives have been taught and practiced sufficiently. The texts we examined deal with these two adjectives correctly and sufficiently, as do the grammar reference materials we examined.

3.2. Items 5-7 and 17-20: “---ta” and “---teiru” Adjective Forms for English “---ed/en” and “---ing”

The modifying forms of “---teiru” and “-----ta” have English equivalents in the present participle (“-ing”) and past participle (“-ed”), including irregular verb forms (“-en”). The Japanese adjective forms are generally taught by comparing them to the English relative clauses. For instance, item 7 “nusumareta kuruma” translates to “The car which was/has been stolen.” Subjects who knew this form as the relative clause in English successfully translated the sentences, while the others failed to translate them at all or did so incorrectly, particularly with the “---teiru” form in Japanese and the “---ing” in English.

Examples:

Item 5: “Jozuni sukii wo shiteiru hito wa----.” was translated into “Skiing person ----.” in stead of “The person who is skiing----.”

Item 19: “”The singing woman is ----.” was translated into “Utatteimasu josei wa ---.” in stead of “Utatteiru josei wa ---.”

By consulting a dictionary for the “---ta” form as the past form of the given verbs, some subjects correctly translated the following items into Japanese modifying use even despite their lack of knowledge of the relative clause formation in Japanese:

Examples:

Item 6: “shiagatta shigoto” into “the finished work”

Item 7: “nusumareta kuruma” into “the stolen car”

Item 17: “The broken window” into “kowareta mado”

Item 18: “The finished work” into “oeta shigoto”

However, this strategy did not work for the predicate use. See the following:

Item 20: “The work has been finished” into “-----wa owatta.” instead of “-----wa owatteimasu.”

Again, using a dictionary for word-for-word translations with incomplete grammatical knowledge caused this type of mistakes. Actually, the following points were found among the dictionaries we examined:

- a. Large ones list the “---ed” as the past or the past participle with the “---ta” in Japanese, but small ones do not list it.
- b. Some list the “---ed” as adjective with the “---ta” in Japanese.
- c. Some do not list even the word family of each entry.
- d. Some have examples of the usage.

What these mean is twofold: one is that there is no consistency among the dictionaries as to what to specify for each entry and the other is, therefore, none of them is fully useful unless the learner possesses a solid grammar knowledge of Japanese.

An examination of textbooks shows that Japanese adjective clauses are not sufficiently taught, especially compared to the amount of time given to “---i” and “---na” adjectives. Some texts do not even deal with these forms of adjectives, even at a higher level. Certainly, the Japanese relative clause needs to be practiced more extensively and the practice should include both the modifying and predicate use of the relative clause in such forms as “the singing woman” versus “the woman who is singing.” The subjects said that the latter form is actually easier than the former, knowing that the former has the same meaning as the latter when translated into Japanese.

The reference materials deal with these adjectives much in the same way as the texts do.

Other points to be addressed clearly when teaching Japanese adjective clauses are as follows:

- a) There are no relative pronouns in Japanese.
- b) No matter how long an adjective phrase is in Japanese, it is placed in front of the noun to be modified. See the following examples below:

a. Kowareta uchi

b. Kinou no ookii taihuu de kanari kowareta uchi

c) Only the plain form of verbs is used for the modifying use, while the proper form is used depending on the tense and the mode (affirmative or negative) in the predicate within a simple sentence or the last clause of a compound sentence. See some examples below:

a. Hashitteiru dansei wa -----.

b. Tanaka-san wa ima hashitteimasu.

d) Differences in nuances between “---ta” and “---teiru” need to be explained as clearly as possible with major distinctions as follows:

“---ta”: general use for a completed action and the result of which remains.

a. Owatta shigoto (Perfect/Past)

b. Kowareta mado (Perfect)

c. Takusan tsumotta yuki (Perfect)

“---teiru”: general use for an on-going and temporal action or situation.

d. Nihongo wo oshieteiru sensei (Present)

e. Tegami wo kaiteiru hito (Progressive)

f. Kekkonshiteiru hujin (Perfect)

e) Also, it should be noted that the tense distinction in English is very strict, but not in Japanese, which uses context as the determinant for proper tense. For a more detailed discussion on differences between “---ta” and “---teiru” see Mizutani (1985: 81-132) and Kinsui (1994: 29-65).

3.3. Items 8-9 and 21-22: Adjective Forms without “-ing” or “-ed” in English

Many English adjectives that are not participles can also be translated into “---ta” or “---teiru” Japanese adjectives. For example, items 21 “clear” and 22 “dry” can be translated into “hareta” and “kawaiteiru.” Several subjects easily translated “a clear sky” as “hareta sora” after consulting their dictionaries, even though they had no idea why the “---ta” form was correct. However, the same subjects could not translate the phrase correctly for the predicate use without a good understanding of how this kind of adjective form is used because “hareta” needs to be changed into “hareteimasu” for “---is clear.” Many subjects translated it into “hareta” based on

what the dictionary says instead of “----hareteimasu” This was true also of item 20 “dry”. The correct form is “kawaiteimasu,” not “kawaita” as the dictionary indicates. Furthermore, the dictionary lists one definition as “reitan na” (冷淡な) among other definitions with “---ta” endings for this adjective, “dry.” Some subjects, therefore, created “Kono shatsu wa reitan desu.” Semantically, this is wrong and demonstrates the danger of relying on a dictionary without much grammatical understanding of this kind of adjective in translating into Japanese. In many cases the automatic choice of “---i/---na” definitions results in semantically incorrect translations. Surprisingly, few texts deal with this kind of English adjectives as “---ta” or “---teiru” adjective forms. Instead, they are usually translated as either “---na” or “---i” adjectives, omitting other possible translations with “---ta/---teiru” forms. Again, this is the case for the reference materials. This lack of explanation severely limits the growth of the students’ vocabulary and their use of a dictionary. In teaching this kind of adjective, the following points need to be taught.

a) The kind of adjective as in “a clear sky” is considered predicate use within a relative clause, which requires the “---ta” form, as shown below

‘a clear sky “(“hareta”)<---> “a sky which is clear”

However, when used as the predicate of a simple sentence or as the last clause of a compound sentence, “-ta” needs to be changed into the proper form of “-teiru” like “hareteiru” depending on the tense and mode of the sentence. The point of changing “---ta” to “---teiru” seems to be very difficult for students to grasp because this kind of adjective takes the same form whether it is used as in the modifying or predicate position in English. See the examples below:

a. The clear sky is -----.

b. The sky is clear.

b) The “---ta” form is possible because most of these kinds of adjectives function as verbs and many have both transitive (vt) and intransitive verb (vi) functions. Actually, some dictionaries list only the function of verbs for these kinds of English words, but not adjectives. See the examples below:

a. clear akirakana (---na), akirakaninaru (vi), akirakanisuru (vt)

b. close shimatta (---ta), shimaru (vi), shimeru (vt)

c. dry kawaita (--ta), kawaku (vi), kawakasu (vt)

As the examples show, these English adjectives can take various forms in Japanese. Understanding of and practice using the Japanese equivalents in a dictionary for this kind of English adjectives is also essential for the learners to be able to use the dictionary properly both grammatically and semantically.

3.4. Noun + no (+adjective/participle) Forms

The final adjective form, which proved even more difficult than the previous examples, is the use of “no” preceded by a noun or a noun phrase. This pattern can be followed by “---i” adjectives or a plain verb in many cases. Item 10 “uten no hi” (雨天の日) for “a rainy day” and item 11 “mura no nai ten” (斑の無い点) for “scores which do not show big variations” are examples of this adjective form. Many subjects translated well for “uten no hi” by using a dictionary, but did not do well for “mura no nai ten.” The reason for this is that their knowledge of “no” as “of” in English did not work well for the latter, but it did for the former. Almost no text or reference material explains this form properly, and many texts do not even include this pattern despite its importance and frequent use. The following explanations for this pattern may help the students understand it:

- a. As in the case of “dry,” this pattern is simply the predicate part of the relative clause as shown in the examples above. See the examples for both the modifying use and the predicate use below:

		Modifying	Predicate
1. clean:	"mukizu no"	無傷の	---は 無傷です
2. close:	"kinen no"	近縁の	---は 近縁です
3. free:	"muryou no"	無料の	---は 無料です
4. rough:	"ooyoso no"	凡その	---は 凡そです
5. damp:	"shikke no aru"	湿気のある	湿気がある
6. loose:	"shimari no nai"	締まりの無い	締まりが無い
7. fine:	"tenki no yoi"	天気の良い	天気が良い
8. open:	"kakoi no nai"	囲いの無い	囲いが無い

It should be noted here that the Japanese definition given to each of the English words above as the modifying use is taken directly from the dictionaries we examined.

b. “No” is the same as “ga” when used as the subject case marker in Japanese relative clauses; that is “uten no hi” is “Hi ga uten.” and “Mura no nai (ten)” is the same as “Mura ga nai,” as shown above. Historically, “no” and “ga” are the same particle (Bleiler 1963: 83).

4. Conclusion

This research was directed towards showing the very high frequency and importance of the Japanese adjective forms other than “---i” and “---na” and demonstrating how much these adjective forms are grammatically restricted in their use. Without sufficient grammatical understanding of these forms, students have a great deal of difficulty using dictionaries to help them. Our findings show that these forms do present problems for our students and need to be taught and drilled much more than they have been at the beginning and intermediate levels of study. When our students ask “How do you say ___ in Japanese?” or “What does this Japanese phrase or word mean?” we may tend to give a translation without having a notion as to what the real problem is. This practice of giving and receiving translation equivalents may wrongly lead the learner to believe that language learning is largely memorization of vocabulary and a little bit of grammar. However, language is much more rule governed than we think, and as this study has shown, the Japanese and English adjective forms cannot simply be translated back and forth. Understanding of the underlying grammatical rules and semantic considerations are essential for our students to use the correct adjectival forms, and much more teaching and learning of the Japanese adjective forms other than “---i” and “---na” needs to be made.

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Appendix A

Translation Worksheet

Name: _____

Directions: Translate the following English sentences into Japanese and vice versa. You are allowed to use any dictionaries you have.

- 1 これは とても 大きい 家だね。
- 2 山田さんは 学生に 親切な 先生です。
- 3 その山は 非常に 美しかったです。
- 4 この町は きれい ではありません。
- 5 上手に スキーを している 人は 山本さんです。
- 6 仕上がった 仕事は かたづけしてください。
- 7 ぬすまれた 車は まだ 見つかっていません。
- 8 その 太った 男の人は スミスさんです。
- 9 飢えている ライオンは きけんです。
- 10 雨天の 日は きらいです。
- 11 斑のない 点を とるように しましょう。
- 12 人の多い 町は あまり 行きません。
- 13 Whose is this heavy suitcase?
- 14 Last winter was very cold.
- 15 I want to visit a famous temple in Japan.
- 16 That gentleman was not kind.
- 17 The broken windows look terrible.
- 18 He showed me the finished work.
- 19 The singing woman is Ms. Yoshida.
- 20 The work has been finished.
- 21 I love to see a clear sky.
- 22 The shirt is already dry.

Appendix B

Examined Materials

Texts:

- Association for Japanese-Language Teaching. Japanese for busy people Book I (1994), II (1994), III (1995). Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- Japanese Language Promotion Center. Intensive course in JAPANESE: Elementary (1970), Intermediate (1980). Tokyo: Language Services Co. LTD.
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- Osamu, M. (1995). An introduction to Modern Japanese. Tokyo: The Japan Times.
- Tohsaku, Y.-H. Yookoso: An invitation to contemporary Japanese (1994) & Continuing with contemporary Japanese (1995). New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Tsukuba Language Group. Situational functional Japanese. Vol 1 (1991), 2 (1992), 3 (1992). Tokyo: Bonjinsha.

Grammar Reference Materials:

- Kuno, S. (1983). The structure of the Japanese language. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
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- Makino, S. & Tsutsui, M. (1987). A dictionary of basic Japanese grammar. Tokyo: The Japan Times
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Dictionaries:

English to Japanese

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- Kenkyusha. (1990). Kenkyusha's furigana English-Japanese dictionary. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
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- Takahashi, M. (1991). Takahashi's Romanized English-Japanese dictionary (7th ed.). Tokyo: Taiseido Shobo Co., Ltd.

Japanese to English

- Masuda, K. (Ed.). (1987). Kenkyusha's New pocket Japanese-English dictionary (26th ed.). Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- The Japan Foundation. (1986). Basic Japanese-English dictionary (1st ed.). Tokyo: Bonjinsha

English to Japanese & Japanese to English

- Martin, S. (Ed.). (1983). Basic Japanese conversation dictionary: English-Japanese/Japanese-English (5th ed.). Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co.
- Takahashi, H. & Takahashi, K. (Eds.). (1986). Romanized English-Japanese/Japanese-English dictionary: Pocket size (1st ed.). Tokyo: Taiseido